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ABSTRACT

The attitudes and practices of teachers of English in an elementary school in India were studied through a questionnaire completed by all 11 teachers who taught the English classes in grades 1 through 5. The survey elicited data about participants' beliefs about teaching English and their instructional and assessment practices. Teachers believed that students should learn to communicate freely in English and were well aware of the importance of English as a national language for India. Teachers used the same texts, planned the curriculum together, and followed a similar schedule. Teachers graded all assignments, and gave frequent tests. All of the assessments had a primary focus on writing. Teachers were not enthusiastic about the frequent testing required because they thought testing adversely affected the time spent on learning. Eight of the 11 teachers said they spent little time assessing listening skills. As a result, teacher beliefs seemed to be at variance with assessment practices. Teachers' avowed beliefs in the importance of being a proficient speaker of English were not supported by their testing practices. (SLD)

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Assessment And Testing In An English Classroom In India

The natural connection between learning and assessment is that students are encouraged to acquire new skills and knowledge (Tanner, 2001). Post-instruction assessment ensures that the student's progress is documented and this information is used to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Four essential components to implementing classroom assessment are purpose, measurement, evaluation and use (McMillan, 2001).

Two major sources of influence affect the decision made about testing and grading. First, the teacher's beliefs and values about teaching explain how and why specific practices are used. Second, pressures external to the teacher, such as school grading policies, parental demand and large-scale high-stakes testing, are often in constant tension with the teacher's beliefs (McMillan & Workman, 1999).

This paper describes the assessment pattern of an elementary school in India. The respondents' stated purposes of teaching English are analyzed in relation to the emphases of receptive and productive skills in the assessments and how this information is deployed.

Methodology

An English-medium K-12 private school in a metropolitan city in India with a total student strength of over 3,000, committed to a language immersion approach with time-on-English tasks a priority, was the focus of this study. The entire faculty of 11 teachers who taught all the English classes in grades 1-5, and impacted about 900 students participated in the study.

The survey of 32 items was designed with a mixture of open-ended and closed questions including prompts, providing for individual responses. Among other themes, the survey elicited

data about (a) participants' beliefs about teaching English; (b) classroom focus on speaking, listening; reading and writing skills; and (c) assessments and testing practices in the school.

The participants, the chair of the English department and the principal of the school studied the compiled data for member checks. The data were then coded and analyzed by the researcher.

Results

Purposes of studying English

Results of the survey showed clearly that the teachers held the beliefs that students "should learn to communicate freely (in) and to understand (English)". They were well aware of the importance of English internationally and in India as "a common language throughout the world spoken by one-tenth of human population" and "the first language in our country (India)." They awarded its place as "the best medium of communication between people of different nationalities," "the language of the international aviation" and "the unofficial first language of international sports."

There was an overall consensus on the ability of English to open doors for the students. The instrumental value placed on the language was obvious in statements such as English helps us "to exploit the various opportunities offered all around the globe" and "to keep pace with developments in science, technology and other fields of study." In the microcosmic world of the school, the teachers did not lose sight of their students' need to master the language as a requirement for academic success. As one respondent stated, "It helps the pupils a lot to learn subjects like science, social studies, etc."

Description of assessment patterns

All the teachers teaching a grade level used the same textbooks, planned the curriculum together and followed a similar schedule. The students were required to take biweekly assignments which were between 15 and 40 minutes duration. At the end of every testing period, of about 14 weeks, students in different sections of the same grade levels took common examinations set by the teachers in consultation with each other.

All 11 respondents stated that they graded every assignment. Prestigious awards and merit cards are issued to students at the end of the academic year. The grades in these assignments and end-of-term examinations are used to compute eligibility. It was therefore deemed necessary to grade each assignment and maintain accurate records.

Respondents were not enthusiastic about such frequent testing because it adversely affected the time spent on learning. They felt that the testing could be more effective if the strength of the class were closer to 30 than 50.

Assessment of skills

Survey data showed that all the assessments had a primary focus on writing. Two teachers said that every assessment also had a reading comprehension component while four others said that an average of 35% of the assessments focused on reading comprehension. But five others (almost 50% of teachers) said the assessments had no reading component attached to them except for the questions that prompt writing. Comprehension and understanding that are part of the reading act were thus given very little importance.

Eight of the 11 teachers said that they spent no time or 0% of class time assessing listening skills. Two of the teachers said maybe 10% of their time was spent on listening comprehension. One teacher did not respond to the question.

None of the assessments focused on speaking skills. Therefore, there was no basis from which to evaluate oral language.

Use of testing information

The respondents used the bi-weekly assignments and end-of-term examinations for a variety of purposes including diagnosis, grading and instruction. The assignments are provided students opportunities to practice two skills: (a) They were able to time their responses without going over the allotted time. (b) Students learnt from each other when they compared their answers.

The assignments were seen as preparation for the term-end exams. For the most part, these assignments were opportunities for students to 'regurgitate' material that the teachers had given the students as part of their instruction. They focused on limited material and tested the short-term memory of the students without developing their written or oral communication skills.

If they wanted their students to study all the material, they ensured that the assignments cover all the material so that students did not do selective learning but were well-equipped to tackle the cumulative material required for terminal exams.

Planning instructional design was done with more care. While making up the test, they used more than conventional letters and sentences and incorporated figures, diagrams and flash cards.

At a diagnostic level, teachers assured themselves that students could read and respond correctly to questions. They decided what topics need to be revisited and how often for better learning and tested other areas in which no written material is available. They also communicated expectations, such as reminding students to write complete sentences.

Discussion

Auditing of skills appears to be the chief purpose of the assessment system in this school. Thus the other uses of diagnosis and planning instruction are not given weightage. This is apparently due to the external requirement of the grades being used to report achievement rather than learning. Other factors of grading such as effort and improvement are not considered as part of the assessment policy.

Teacher beliefs seem to be at variance with assessment practices. Though they would like their students to be proficient speakers of the language, the lack of assessment and reporting of English oral skills in the school system is a comment on how low on a scale of importance these skills are placed, and creates a divide between purpose and implementation.

If teachers wish to bridge the gap between purpose and implementation, the curriculum must be re-framed to include oral and listening skills. Each lesson must include objectives aimed at these skills. The importance placed on these skills will be communicated to parents when they are included in the reporting scheme every grading period.

Teacher expectations and behavior affect student learning. With a lack of specific expectation for speaking and listening skill levels there is non-systematic assessment of proficiency. Therefore, it is less likely that students will focus on the significance of the task. This in turn may cause teachers to see their students achieving less than they should, leading to professional dissatisfaction and frustration.

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